DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 278 981 CS 008 719

AUTHOR Ryan, Sheila M.
TITLE Taking the Top Off Their Heads: Examining Young Readers' Transactions with Text.
PUB DATE May 85
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of Children's Literature in Elementary Education (17th, Athens, GA, May 10-11, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basal Reading; Cognitive Processes; Elementary Education; Evaluation Criteria; *Evaluation Methods; *Informal Reading Inventories; Metacognition; Reader Response; Reader Text Relationship; *Reading Achievement; Reading Comprehension; *Reading Diagnosis; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Processes; Reading Research; Reading Strategies; Student Evaluation

ABSTRACT

Reading evaluation should (1) be a continuous process using many samples of a learner's work, (2) allow students to engage in uninterrupted reading, (3) constitute a learning situation, and (4) indicate new directions for improvement in an open-ended manner. Current practices for evaluating children's reading processes are usually based on samples of work that are part of the basal reading series and offer only a limited view of students' abilities. Basal series also stress a mastery learning approach, which leaves little time for the uninterrupted reading needed for a fair evaluation of reading processes. Finally, students who fail to meet the criteria to progress to the next level in a basal reading program are offered more basal reading rather than new avenues for improvement. A more accurate alternative, naturalistic assessment is based on observing students' responses to reading as they are recorded through devices such as checklists, anecdotal records, tape recording, and work samples. These procedures can be structured as learning activities in the course of teacher-student interviews. Students can respond individually or interact with a group in response to a text, and by carefully structuring these interviews, teachers can make inferences about students' covert thinking processes in reading. This and other adaptations of the interviewing process fulfill the criteria for effective reading evaluation. (Categories of reading strategies are included.) (SRT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED278981

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Sheila M. Ryan
345 Wekiva Cove Road
Longwood, FL 32779

Taking the Top Off Their Heads: Examining Young Readers' Transactions with Text

Summary

Evaluation of learning is a vital part of the educational cycle. This article examines whether current classroom practices have kept pace with current knowledge about the reading process. Current practices are examined according to four criteria that define evaluation. According to these criteria evaluation 1) is a continuous process which utilizes many samples of a learner's work, 2) allows students to engage in a particular behavior called for by designated objectives, 3) constitutes a learning situation, and 4) indicates new directions in an open-ended manner. Current evaluation methods are discussed in light of these criteria and alternate methods which parallel recent models of reading are offered.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sheila M. N. Ryan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS008719

Taking the Top Off Their Heads: Examining Young Readers' Transactions with Text

Sheila M. Ryan
DeKalb College
Dunwoody, Georgia

Paper Presented at the 17th Annual Conference of
Children's Literature in Elementary Education
The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia
May 10-11, 1985

Evaluation is a major component of curriculum development accomplished by describing student progress in meeting educational goals. It is a continuous process which utilizes many samples of a learner's work, allows students to engage in a particular behavior called for by designated objectives, constitutes a learning situation, and indicates new directions in an open-ended manner (Ammons, 1974). The goals of an educational program provide a basis for the evaluation process and, in turn, the results of the evaluation give new direction to determining goals.

In a reading program, goals and objectives reflect the way that curriculum developers define reading. In the past two decades, various definitions and theories of reading have emphasized that reading involves perceptual, cognitive, and affective responses. Research from many disciplines has converged by examining the psycholinguistic and sociocultural aspects of the reading process. In addition, reading is viewed as a process in which all these variables interact as readers engage in the act of reading. Considering the breadth of these parameters, developing learning activities and evaluation procedures to meet these goals is no easy task. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether current classroom practices have kept pace with these added domains of the reading process and to

explore ways to make efficient use of evaluation procedures that also serve as learning situations.

Current Reading Programs

Typically, the basic element in reading programs is the basal reading series. Shannon (1982) presents a historical review from 1924 to present that shows teachers rely heavily on commercial materials to teach reading. Though different series may emphasize aspects of the reading process in various ways, the components often include the texts with reading selections, teachers' manuals with procedures for coordinating lessons, related materials such as workbooks for written responses and ditto masters to reinforce these activities, testing materials for initial placement and for assessment of skills at each level, and other optional resource materials.

After observing classroom instruction in reading, Durkin (1978-79) came to the conclusion that very little comprehension instruction occurred in these classrooms. In addition, she noted that the basal manuals failed to present instructions on how to teach skills the lessons purported to teach. Other authorities question the heavy reliance on basal reading series since it reduces literacy to a tight sequence of arbitrary skills in which the teacher becomes a technician or part of a "delivery system" (Artley, 1980; Goodman, 1979; Klein, 1975).

In view of these criticisms it seems that the learning activities and instructional procedures have not changed significantly to include current models of the reading process. A logical assumption is that evaluation of students' reading progress has not utilized these added parameters either. To reiterate, evaluation requires adequate samples of a learner's work, allows students to engage in the behavior, constitutes a learning situation, and is open-ended suggesting new directions for program adaptation.

Samples of Learner's Work

The samples of work upon which students are normally evaluated are part and parcel of the basal reading series. These samples include teacher judgments of responses during directed reading of texts or follow-up discussions, written responses in workbooks and on dittos, and scores on mastery tests for each reading level. Though other creative activities may be included for motivational purposes, these objective measures are required information on students' reading progress records. These samples afford a limited view of students' abilities because the questions used to assess comprehension are either generated by the authors of the text or the teacher.

Research shows that comprehension questions are often ambiguous and that poor readers may look for patterns in how questions are to be answered, patterns relating solely to the

information in the text (Cole & Griffin, 1983; Poggi, 1984). Perhaps this inappropriate strategy has been generalized from the fact that the majority of comprehension questions encountered tap low-level, literal thinking skills. This type of program falls short of meeting the objectives included in the cognitive, linguistic, affective, and social domains of current models of the reading process.

Engagement in Reading Behavior

Few educators would dispute that the way to learn a skill is to engage in the activity repeatedly. Learning to read and learning to comprehend then should be done in the context of practicing reading. Since the school day is divided into periods for various curricular subjects, reading instructional time is limited. With these time limitations the mastery learning approach utilized in basal series is reduced to a set of hierarchical goals and a teach-and-test instructional philosophy (Shannon, 1984). Little time is left to practice uninterrupted reading.

Studies examining the natural development of language demonstrate that social interaction is necessary for learning. Time constraints limit this aspect of reading as well. Schools allow few opportunities for expressive language or for the kind of collaborative teaching necessary for learning literacy (Smith, 1983). Classroom interaction studies point out that pupil

classroom language use is limited or restricted both in terms of quantity and in interaction patterns. Several of these studies have found a relatively stable pattern in which teachers control topic and speaker, initiate talk, and in lesson sequences serve as evaluators of talk (Dillon & Searle, 1981). To a certain degree, teachers are forced into using this format in order to meet the demands of the curriculum, which in this case is the basal reading mastery program. According to Shannon (1984), within basal mastery programs objectivity of the packaged materials transcends subjectivity of teacher judgment and, therefore, teachers' knowledge of the reading process is rendered useless.

Learning Situations

The learning situations produced from the kind of classroom contexts discussed include opportunities for students to learn how to answer questions during oral encounters with the teacher and in written responses to the authors of the basal series. As far as learning to read critically and respond personally, they have not had much opportunity. They have not learned much about their own thinking processes but have had to learn a new language code just for school which fails to utilize their full range of language and learning abilities (Dillon & Searle, 1981).

Open-ended System

Based on evaluations made in reading mastery tests, students

who fail to meet the criteria to progress to the next level are often given more of the same. That is, they are given remedial exercises which use different content but the same approach to teaching certain skills. Unfortunately, students who are having difficulty are often given more isolated skill practice and less opportunity for practicing reading orally or silently (Allington, 1980). When students fail, administrators like those described by Shannon (1984) may reject requests to alter the curriculum and instead find fault with either the teacher or the student. Clearly this aspect of basal reading programs does not incorporate all areas of the reading process, nor does it qualify as an open-ended system for suggesting new directions.

Alternative Evaluation Procedures

Since there seems to be a dichotomy between the way children learn language naturally and the way reading is taught, methods for using naturalistic assessment can provide a viable alternative. Moore (1984) states that naturalistic assessment of reading comprehension is based on observing students' responses to reading during the school day. Teachers have always used methods like these informally, but these procedures can also provide a formal evaluation for making diagnostic decisions about students' progress. Sources of information can be recorded through devices such as checklists, anecdotal records, tape

recordings, and work samples. As these comprehending behaviors are gathered, teachers can interpret them to plan instructional activities.

In order to provide more efficient use of classroom instructional time, these assessment procedures can also be structured as learning activities. Aspects of natural learning contexts found in several recent studies provide keys to developing better learning activities and evaluation procedures. Deford and Harste (1982) identify three concepts of how children learn language which affect the curriculum. First, classrooms are seen as contexts of literacy which offer both constraints and potentials for language learning. Second, the most conducive settings for literacy learning are meaningful language settings where transactions are allowed to occur naturally. Third, the best data upon which to make instructional decisions are obtained by observing learners in supportive, functional language settings.

Specific learning activities for teaching reading can be modeled after natural learning principles. Garth Brown (1984) suggests that our capacity to become more powerfully literate as a society depends upon our capacity to find better ways to explain to and to show others what we do when we read and write. He suggests that it would provide better quality information to take the top off our own heads and think aloud for the learner about how we do it. He stresses that we do this only as a means of demonstrating a personal working model and not as a method for mandating that this is the only way to accomplish the task.

A variation of this teaching-learning paradigm is to take the top off the children's heads to examine their reading processes. Researchers have been utilizing this notion in a variety of ways by asking students to respond to what they read. The tasks described as response to literature, protocol analysis, introspection, retrospection, problem-solving interview, and ethnographic interview are basically derived from one common procedure--that is, they involve a vocal encounter between an interviewer who questions and an informant who answers. The types of interview vary with respect to the structure of the questions, timing, and interview occasion. The structure and sequencing of the questions and the formality of the occasion are high when the interviewer is interested in obtaining responses to specific stimuli. Structure, sequence, and formality are low in cases where the interviewer forms questions as they emerge from the informants' responses.

The necessary components for structuring talk-aloud interviews are the reader or readers, a text, the interviewer, and a method for recording the verbalizations and other behaviors during reading. Students can be asked to respond individually or to interact with a group in response to a text. The text can be any kind of reading matter, including selections from the basal series. Responses can be given to a whole text after reading or to designated parts of text during reading. The responses can be tape-recorded and/or transcribed and the students may also be videotaped.

The following examples are varied tasks used in a study by Ryan (1983) to examine reading strategies of fifth grade students.

Responses After Reading

The first talk-aloud task was structured similar to the response to literature tasks described by Galda (1982). Students were asked to respond in a small group, adult guided discussion. The role of the investigator was to initiate and encourage discussion by asking open and clarifying questions such as: "Could you tell me about the story?" "Could you explain?" "How can you tell that?" The following dialogue demonstrates two students' growing awareness of the author's purpose and characterization.

> Sherri: . . . but I think the author's really trying to get out their feelings of how they feel in the story.
>
> Rhonda: Well I think that the author's trying to show how things really happen between brothers and sisters.

Understanding the role of the author in creating a story is crucial to mature reading ability. Teachers can use this type of task to evaluate how individual children are beginning to use these characteristics.

Other reading skills needed for comprehension can be assessed by examining students' responses. The following example shows how two readers misread parts of a story and suggests possible points at which comprehension broke down in response to a short story from the basal reader, "Sled," by Thomas Adams.

Shawn: Well he had a sled and he was going down the hill on the sled after he ate dinner and this other girl wanted to try going down on the sled . . . .

Researcher: Can you add to that?

Sherri: Well, before he said he had gone out . . . that he had eaten dinner and he had to apologize to his sister and everything . . . and then he saw a girl . . .

Researcher: Who was the girl?

Sherri: A jogger, I think.

Both readers missed an essential link between the fact that the brother, angry because he was forced to apologize to his sister, connives to let her ride his sled with a cracked runner so she would take the blame for breaking it. This example demonstrates how teachers might analyze a weakness for noting details and cause-and-effect relationships. Students could be asked to reexamine the point in the text where faulty inferences began and to discuss the differences between valid interpretations and their own.

Another small group structure forces students to make their thoughts explicit by asking them to relay their responses to a peer who has not read the text. The following excerpts demonstrate opportunities for evaluation.

Sherri: [Gives summary of story.]

Heather: Wait, say the end again.

Sherri: He always gets in trouble and he always goes home on the kindergarten bus.

Heather: Okay, now the robbers got the book?

Sherri: . . . it's a workbook that has writing in it, and it was this girl's who was the smartest in the class. And Todd grabbed it and gave it to the robbers and they left the room.

Heather: They thought it was money?

Sherri: No, they thought it was a little more than that 'cause they didn't know how to read or anything.

Sherri has not given Heather enough information for her to comprehend the events properly. Heather keeps probing until she gets enough information. This activity can be especially useful in teaching summarization and organization skills. In other words, students must learn to identify the main ideas and relationships to communicate the meaning of the story.

This activity is an adaptation of a "tutor task" described by Brown (1980). A tutor, or more mature reader, explains to a less mature reader how to proceed on a particular task. The following response is from a fifth grade student telling a first grader how to read a story.

Shawn: First, probably I'd look at the pictures. Then I'd read the first few paragraphs, then read them again . . . .

Alex: How do you read the hard words?

Shawn: If there are any hard words or I get stuck, I either ask the teacher or use the dictionary.

Teachers can evaluate the students' options for monitoring and repairing comprehension by using this type of task.

Responses During Reading

Problem-solving interviews are structured by giving students

a task and asking them to verbalize their thoughts as they are solving the problem. The following example demonstrates one student's response to a single sentence in the children's story Lentil, by Robert McCloskey.

> Text: But he did want to make music, so he saved up enough pennies to buy a harmonica.
>
> Heather: Pennies? That must be a long time ago.

Other responses such as the following display the range of thinking strategies used during reading.

> Heather: He must be old . . . just sits on the bench. Wait a minute . . . I have no idea what "whittled" means . . . must just sit there and frownin' out at everybody.
>
> Heather: I was right because it says he would stuff his harmonica in his pocket and take a short cut so he wouldn't be late to school.
>
> Heather: This is a figure of speech 'cause they said they held their breath--no way--they wouldn't hold their breath, not for very long anyway.
>
> Heather: I bet it's gonna start raining 'cause it said then there was a wet sound from above.
>
> Heather: I always do this when I'm reading. I'll be reading the words but my mind's out there and I'm not even reading the words.
>
> Heather: I don't know who "he" is in here . . . it just says, "then he let out a loud chuckle," wait, what was the last sentence in here? [Turns page back] Oh, okay . . .

In addition to the cued responses, the researcher asked students about certain behaviors observed during reading.

> Researcher: One time you went back and looked at a page? What were you doing then?
>
> Heather: Because it had stopped with a comma and when you read on you had forgotten what went before so I had to go back . . . so I could go on and understand the meaning.

These and other behaviors could also be shown to students after videotaping their responses and then asking them to reflect back on what they were doing. The benefit of using this approach is that it allows the researcher/teacher to make inferences from the students' verbalizations about their underlying thinking processes. In this study, six strategies emerged from the students' protocols and are defined in Table 1.

In addition to these structured responses to literature tasks, teachers can observe naturally occurring responses during regular class activities. For example, Hickman (1980) describes the use of ethnographic techniques to record spontaneous responses to literature in the context of a classroom setting.

Other ways to adapt the learning activities and evaluations of students' response to literature are available. "Response" does not always have to mean verbal responding. Writing, art, music, and drama are alternate sign systems which teachers can utilize for asking students to respond.

Summary

The activities described in this article, as well as other adaptations of the basic interviewing process, follow the elements crucial to effective evaluation and are based on current theories of the reading process. Adequate samples of students' behavior can be structured and collected in a variety of ways.

Table 1

Interpretive Categories and Definitions

for Reading Strategies

Category	Definition
Reporting:	Includes reproducing and paraphrasing the literal message represented in the text.
Conjecturing:	Includes offering a hypothesis, predicting outcomes, asserting or imposing meaning not stated in text.
Contextualizing:	Includes relating and associating text to concepts and events in memory through imaging and other sensory perceptions, by stereotyping, creating scenarios, and using figurative language.
Structuring:	Includes referring to structural features of text, to author's style or use of language, or to the evidence of using these features.
Monitoring:	Includes self-regulated thinking strategies of questioning, pausing, subvocalizing, and stating comprehension or failure to comprehend.
Repairing:	Includes rereading, orally or silently, asking for outside help, using context clues, supplying placeholding words to substitute unknown word, using other word analysis skills, skipping over trouble spots, correcting previous statements and revising information in schema.

Students are engaged in the behavior of reading and responding personally and interactively with members of their community. At the same time, learning situations are presented as they become aware of their own personal working model for reading. Finally, it is a continuous, open-ended process which suggests new directions for expanding their sets of options in transacting with text.

Teachers can structure interviews in a variety of ways to make inferences about students' covert thinking processes in reading. In short, teachers ask students to take the top off their heads and think aloud for them and for others about what they are doing when they read. These procedures fulfill the criteria for effective evaluation and provide economic use of classroom instructional time by making evaluation a learning situation.

References

Adams, T. "Sled." Adventures for Young Readers. Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, Inc., Bookmark Basal Reading Series, 1979.

Allington, R. "Poor Readers Don't Get to Read Much in Reading Groups." Language Arts 57 (1980): 872-876.

Ammons, M. "Evaluation: What Is It? Who Does It? When Should It Be Done?" In The Evaluation of Children's Reading Achievement, edited by J. C. Barrett. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1974.

Artley, A. "Reading: Skills or Competencies?" Language Arts 57 (1980): 546-549.

Brown, A. "Metacognitive Development and Reading." In Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension, edited by R. J. Rand, B. C. Bruce, and W. F. Brewer. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980.

Brown, G. "Literacy, Power, and the Community." Language Arts 61 (1984): 575-584.

Cole, M., and P. Griffin. "A Sociohistorical Approach to Remediation." The Quarterly Newsletter of the Laboratory of Human Cognition 5 (October 1983): 69-74.

Deford, D., and J. C. Harste. "Child Language Research and Curriculum." Language Arts 59 (1982): 590-600.

Dillon, D., and D. Searle. "The Role of Language in One First Grade Classroom." Research in the Teaching of English 15 (1981): 311-328.

Durkin, D. "What Classroom Observation Reveals about Reading Comprehension." Reading Research Quarterly 14 (1978-79): 481-533.

Galda, L. "Teaching from Children's Responses." Language Arts 59 (1982): 137-142.

Goodman, K. "The Know-More and the Know-Nothing Movements in Reading: A Personal Response." Language Arts 56 (1979): 657-663.

Hickman, J. "Children's Response to Literature: What Happens in the Classroom." Language Arts 57 (1980): 524-529.

Klein, M. "The Reading Program and Classroom Management: Panacea or Perversion?" Elementary English 52 (1975): 351-355.

McCloskey, R. Lentil. New York: Scholastic Book Service, 1940.

Moore, D. "A Case for Naturalistic Assessment of Reading Comprehension." Language Arts 60 (1983): 957-969.

Poggi, J. M. "The Case of the Confused Tenth Grader: Solving the Mystery of a Higher-level Comprehension Problem." Journal of Reading 28 (1984): 44-47.

Ryan, S. N. "An Examination of Reading and Writing Strategies of Selected Fifth Grade Children." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Georgia State University, 1983.

Shannon, P. "A Retrospective Look at Teachers' Reliance on Commercial Reading Materials." Language Arts 59 (1982): 844-853.

Shannon, P. "Mastery Learning in Reading and the Control of Teachers and Students." Language Arts 61 (1984): 484-493.

Smith, F. "Reading Like a Writer." Language Arts 60 (1983): 558-567.